

Reflections and vision of a young African nutritional scientist: talk given during the closing ceremony at the 18th International Congress of Nutrition

As a 'young' and budding nutritionist, I have the luxury of the proverbial long rope: I have dreams, hopes and aspirations for the field of nutrition and a possibly naïve optimism. I have hope that this optimism can, in the foreseeable future, be translated into action. Should I be perceived as being overly critical and optimistic, I hope that at the end of it all I will be forgiven.

I will begin my talk with a statement that we are all familiar with: that negligible progress has been made in Sub-Saharan Africa's malnutrition situation over the past 15 years. A 2005 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) progress report indicated that Sub-Saharan Africa lags far behind other regions in attaining the MDGs of reducing extreme hunger, reducing child mortality and improving maternal health¹. This is a message that I have heard over and over again during the past couple of years. I am beginning to have a feeling that we, the nutrition community, and the rest of the world have internalised these circumstances as the status quo for Africa. Sometimes it appears as if the nutrition community does not really identify with this situation, both as individuals and as professionals. Ladies and gentlemen, this supposed status quo reflects the failure of our profession as nutritionists in addressing the problem of malnutrition in Sub-Saharan Africa. If it is okay for us to claim credit for the progress that has been made in other regions of the world, then we should also take the majority of the blame when such a situation persists. Moreover, not only have we failed as a profession, but most importantly, we have failed the hundreds of millions of children, women and men throughout the world who have died and who continue to die as a result of nutrition-related problems.

In preparation for this talk, I carried out a short survey of some nutrition experts to determine their views on five key nutrition goals in Africa for the next 10 years and what needs to be done to achieve those goals. I also had brief discussions with some of my colleagues on the same issues. Out of the responses to the survey and discussions emerged a conviction that we clearly understand the nature and extent of these problems. Also, as a nutrition community, we have the scientific and technical knowledge about how these problems arise and the potential interventions that we can implement to solve them.

Since the nutrition community fully understands the health and nutrition problems as well as their consequences that disproportionately afflict the poor and we also know the interventions – in theory at least – that can

be used to address these problems, I have asked myself: why do these problems then continue to persist? Why have we not made adequate progress in addressing them? Does Africa have the expertise and capacity at all levels to address its own problems? It is these questions that have shaped my reflections and vision of the future of nutrition in Africa. For the remainder of this talk I will share these reflections and vision by giving you my take on some aspects of these questions.

Do we really know the best way to address these problems?

My answer to this question is yes, but... Yes, because we know the theoretical underpinnings and scientific solutions (and for some, their efficacy as well) to these problems. But, do we really know how to implement these solutions? Personally, I think the science is right, but we still have not fully blossomed in terms of operationalising, implementing and contextualising these solutions. It was evident, during some of the presentations and discussions that took place throughout the week of the congress, that operations research on the effective implementation and management strategies of many nutrition programmes has not been conducted. Existing programmes have also not been properly evaluated, and as a result, we have just been doing more of the same. Unfortunately for us, 'the same' does not work well. Nutrition practitioners have for a long time expressed their frustration about how most of the research conducted in nutrition is irrelevant to them. They have attributed this to the fact that their research needs might not be regarded as being 'scientific enough' by the scientific community. I think it is time for the scientific community, and those involved in community health, public health, international nutrition and the New Nutrition Science research, to be more responsive to the changing needs of nutrition practitioners and the innovative research methodologies they propose. I hope this will be taken as a challenge and that the results of this challenge will be reflected in the presentations and posters the next time we gather.

Why have we not made adequate progress in addressing the nutrition problems?

I will attempt to answer this question in two parts: the first relates to our behaviour as a nutrition community and the

second to the lack of commitment from governments to nutrition.

A few years ago whilst doing an internship in Washington DC, I carried out another short survey to assess the views of nutritionists and health professionals who were familiar with nutrition, the MDGs and/or various factors that would allow the MDGs' success or cause failure in improving nutrition. Results of this survey showed a broad agreement among these professionals that the MDGs provide unprecedented opportunities to improve nutrition and health, but that their impact on nutrition will depend on how they are pursued and how nutrition is addressed within them. In essence, the impact will depend on whether and how the nutrition community, at national and international levels, articulates a coherent and unified agenda for nutrition. Paraphrasing the interviewees, it would behove the nutrition community to find enough common ground to forge an agreement on how nutrition priorities should be pursued in the context of the MDGs and other development strategies. As expected, there will always be different perspectives on a multitude of issues due to a combination of different organisational agendas, personal and professional biases as well as the different lenses through which nutrition can be understood. Science thrives on debates; these debates are necessary for the advancement of the field. But these debates should take place in an appropriate arena and not in a fragmented and self-serving manner that the public can witness. More importantly, the debates and disagreements should be insulated from political actors. Political debates thrive on consensus. When we bring nutrition issues to political actors, they should see consensus among the technocrats as well as commitment from agencies. Therefore, by taking our disagreements outside the appropriate arena and by debating openly in the faces of policy and political actors, we should shoulder the blame for the lack of interest or commitment to nutrition among political actors.

Surely, if we are to be taken more seriously by the outside world and not confuse the general public with mixed messages, we should cease to be known as a community of squabblers who cannot agree on key issues and strategies. We should not be guided by personal aspirations and ambitions. Instead, we need to be guided by the reasons and the values that I hope enticed us to join the profession in the first place. We have dedicated ourselves to ensuring the health and nutritional well-being of marginalised populations. In all our debates and discussions, we should always have in our minds that the longer we continue to squabble and remain inactive, more children continue to die as a result. How much debate will it really take before we as a community begin to act in unison?

The second part of my answer relates to the blame directed towards African governments and the wealthy countries for their lack of commitment and investment in

nutrition. I am sure you will agree with me that it is convenient to blame others for the lack of progress in our field, and at times I agree that it is justified. Nevertheless, I entreat you to dabble with thought. Have we done enough to ensure that nutrition is entrenched in the development agenda? Have we convincingly and passionately articulated, with one voice, why nutrition deserves specific focus in development activities, and expressed clearly how this could be done? Clearly, opportunities exist for more investment in nutrition, but we need to be more strategic in seeking them out. The MDGs and the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers are development initiatives through which nutrition can derive the much needed investment. Closer to home, The New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) project is another potential opportunity from which we could tap some much needed resources. NEPAD has recognised food security and nutrition as components to be tackled in order to facilitate Africa's growth and development. But is the nutrition community in the Africa region ready to translate this recognition to action for nutrition? If not, what more commitment do we need?

I would now like to share with you one of the many ways that I envisage our role as young nutritionists in building and sustaining commitment to and investment in nutrition in our countries and on our continent as a whole. This insight comes from assertions made in policy studies and other related fields. Scholars in these fields often talk about actors in the policy-making process as being 'entrepreneurial'. In the market place, business entrepreneurs are critical players because they attempt to introduce innovative products. I quote: 'They introduce their ideas to others in ways that are persuasive, in ways that lead others to conclude that it is worth their while to work with the entrepreneurs to transform the idea into a fully developed product'². In order for them to succeed in their efforts, entrepreneurs have to fully understand the environment in which they operate and must have the ability to listen closely to others including their competitors.

Similar to the market place, the world of policy-making and of promoting policy innovations can be equally strategic. There are many players in the policy-making arena. They are driven by different values and represent different and at times competing interests. They are all vying for attention to be paid to their issues and are also in need of the same limited resources that we nutritionist are. They too have a genuine and sometimes even more urgent claim to those resources than we nutritionists might have. They too strongly believe that they are being underserved by the existing policies and want more attention to be given to their needs. They are also not satisfied with the 'business as usual' situation and want to see drastic changes in policy directions. In short, a majority of other communities and

sectors are probably as frustrated with governments' lack of commitment to their issues as we are.

To succeed, therefore, in this competitive environment and have nutrition firmly set in a country's development agenda, a critical mass of nutrition policy entrepreneurs needs to emerge, and work towards building and sustaining commitment to nutrition at country level. I firmly believe that we young professionals can be positioned to become these nutrition policy entrepreneurs. We will be mid-level civil servants, academics and members of non-government organisations who do not necessarily make policy. Unlike nutrition policy champions who are top-level civil servants, politicians and vocal public figures and who can directly influence policy, the policy entrepreneurs identify, cultivate and support policy champions³. We shall be engaged in both scientific and policy debates, and strive to forge common understanding and expectations. We will build a measure of trust so that a coherent plan of action can be put in the hands of champions. However, unlike business entrepreneurs who can be perceived as individualistic, as nutrition policy entrepreneurs we will work collaboratively with colleagues from different sectors where improvements in nutrition can also benefit those sectors³. Most of us already understand the different forms of rationality by which the problem of undernutrition can be framed and re-framed so as to appeal to different decision-makers. In addition to the technical perspective (in terms of cause-and-effect, efficacy and effectiveness of nutrition interventions), we will advocate for nutrition from economic, political, legal, social and ethical perspectives⁴.

We are fortunate that we have a good product (nutrition) in the policy market, a product that resonates and cuts across different sectors and a product that every single person has the capacity to identify with. We have a product that we can sell to our competitors in the policy market and we can show how they too can benefit from the success of our product. What we need, like business entrepreneurs, is to establish the opportunities for gain that exist, think critically about these opportunities and establish innovative ways by which we could increase our countries' commitment and investments in nutrition. I believe that with the right strategies, we will succeed.

Does Africa have the capacity to address its own problems?

I will now call on your imagination. Imagine, in a few years time after I have completed my PhD, that I am a successful lecturer and researcher at the University of Zimbabwe. As a leading researcher in the field of obesity, I successfully apply for a \$US 10 million grant to do a comparative study of obesity among the low-income population of London and New York City. As part of this grant, I also have funding for eight MSc and

eight PhD students. Among these students, 10 are from Zimbabwe, four are students of my colleagues in Ghana, Mali, Senegal and South Africa, one MSc student is from London and another MSc student is from New York City. With seven out of eight students at my study site in London being non-British and another seven out of eight students in New York City being non-American, surely will that not be asking too much from the British and American authorities for permission to carry out this study? How do you think the British and American students will feel when I present my results during the IUNS conference in 2017 and I lament about the lack of capacity in advanced nutrition training in England and New York City? Ladies and gentlemen, this unimaginable situation is the norm in Africa today. If indeed those who are doing research in Africa, and those who are hosting this research, are serious about capacity-building in Africa, this situation has to change. If students are to earn MSc and PhD degrees in research done in Africa, at the very least half of those students should be African, and if it is only one student, that student has to be an African. Only then can we genuinely talk about capacity-building in Africa.

On a much brighter note, however, I will share with you a new and exciting initiative which I hope will convince you that there is human capital from which effective nutrition policy entrepreneurs, nutrition scientists and practitioners can emerge and carry on with the good work that many of you currently undertake. The African Nutrition Graduate Students Network (AGSNet) was initiated by a group of African graduate students studying nutrition. AGSNet is an endeavour to build social capacity and capital by developing relations and networks among young professionals. In addition to creating a forum for information sharing, we endeavour to build appropriate attitudes, values and trust among members, and above all provide a unified front to improving nutrition on the continent. By building and re-enforcing effective networks and trust now, we hope that these networks will be sustained throughout our careers and that they will serve as absorbers to challenges that we are bound to face in the future. Through our activities, we anticipate that a new breed of nutrition policy entrepreneurs, nutrition champions, researchers and practitioners will emerge and that these cadres will engender new perspectives to nutrition practice and research.

AGSNet currently has a membership of about 100 students (and growing) from about 24 African countries, studying all over the world. However, we do recognise that there are many more graduate students out there who we have not been able to reach. We are excited that AGSNet will continue to grow in the coming years.

The growth in membership of AGSNet is evidence that the capacity is available to move Africa's nutrition agenda forward. We cannot continue working in Africa as if there

is no capacity to drive programmes from Africa. Undoubtedly, we need even more cadres with advanced training in nutrition and related fields. Certainly, we recognise that we need to strengthen the current institutional capacities in Africa so that more institutions are able to provide advanced-level training in nutrition. We do, nevertheless, have enough young and committed nutritionists to continue with the good work that all of you here have been doing.

We hail from Burkina Faso, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Senegal, Uganda, Zimbabwe and many other African countries. Many of us already have extensive practical experience working on nutrition issues in Africa. We've now complemented our experience with further education. We've had exposure to the 'big agencies' through internships and consultancies. We will soon be coming home ready to work with others who are committed to creating a positive nutrition climate in Africa. We see AGSNet as representing a transition opportunity between the experienced and the budding crop of professionals. We hope that, in the not so distant future, we shall receive the baton and continue with the great work that you all have been doing.

Ladies and gentlemen: the future is now. The vision is now. We, the young African nutrition professionals, are poised to take up the challenge. We have the passion and commitment to do so, and we are going to make a difference!

Thank you.

Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to Barrie Margetts (Senior Lecturer, Southampton University), Milla McLachlan (International Food Policy Research Institute), David Pelletier (Associate Professor, Cornell University), Deladem Kusi-Appouh (Cornell University), Mohammed Ag Ayoya (Cornell University) and Mduduzi Mbuya (Cornell University) for their extremely helpful comments on earlier drafts of the talk.

Nkosinathi VN Mbuya (MSc, PhD candidate)
 Program in International Nutrition
 Division of Nutritional Sciences
 107 Savage Hall, Cornell University
 Ithaca, NY 14853, USA
 Email: nkosi_mbuya@cornell.edu or nkosimbuya@hotmail.com

References

- 1 United Nations (UN). *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2005*. New York: UN, 2005.
- 2 Mintrom M. *Policy Entrepreneurs and Social Choice*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2000.
- 3 Heaver R. *Strengthening Country Commitment to Human Development: Lessons from Nutrition*. Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2005.
- 4 Pelletier DL. Research and policy directions. In: Semba R, Bloem MW, eds. *Nutrition and Health in Developing Countries*. Totowa, NJ: Humana Press, 2001.